Investigating the Value of Nature Centers in Communities
National Audubon Society, Virginia Tech, Stanford University, Ohio State University
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ABSTRACT

With people’s increasing alienation from healthy ecosystems and open spaces, the rise in environmental issues, and the planet’s rapidly urbanizing population, scholars and scientists have argued that people are more disconnected from the natural world now than at any previous time in history. Yet in the United States, a vibrant network of more than 1,200 nature centers holds tremendous potential to serve as hubs for learning and connection, not only with nature, but also with other community members. Nature center proponents argue that these community institutions can, among other benefits, provide great value to communities by protecting and providing habitat for plant and animal species; inspire conservation action, create community gathering places; and enhance the reputation, prestige and well-being of a neighborhood. However, few studies have examined what values people actually hold toward these kind of institutions—and whether the values that nature centers believe they are providing to the community align with the values that communities desire to derive from such places and organizations.

Thus, to probe this gap, our study asks key questions such as: What roles and functions do nature centers serve in their communities? How are nature centers valued by current and potential users, neighbors and other community members? How do nature centers’ organizational missions and activities align with the values of the communities within which they are located? Answers to these
questions may be critical to ensure not only adequate service provision, but also in some instances the survival of the centers themselves. We propose to address these questions through a mixed-methods comparative case study approach, explicitly seeking to reveal critical lessons for mission achievement and the expansion of the relevancy of nature centers and similar institutions to a broader audience.

This research builds on pilot work conducted through an IMLS collaborative planning grant, which identified distinct and measurable sets of values held by community members about nature centers. Pilot study findings suggested that values may be differentially held within subsets of community populations. Moreover, nature center mission statements and staff values may or may not align with values relevant to their surrounding communities. Inaccurate perceptions of each entity about the other may limit opportunities for meaningful engagement. We propose to examine the nature, precursors, and predictors of the ways in which diverse communities value local centers.

Through interviews with directors and staff of 16 nature centers in the United States and surveys with representative samples of their surrounding communities, we aim to uncover the following:

- The full suites of values associated with nature center presence within a community
- The ways in which different groups/components/subsets of people within communities around nature centers differentially value those centers and why
- The influence of different types of center activities upon community perceptions, values, and actions toward the nature center.
- The degree of awareness nature center staff appear to have about their surrounding communities and that surrounding communities appear to have about local nature centers.

Carrying out the research with a diverse set of nature centers in diverse contexts will allow for examination of the conditions under which particular trends or findings tend to manifest. Follow-up interviews with nature center staff and leaders of other institutions in a reflective workshop will encourage deeper understanding, explanation, and careful consideration of the generalizability of the findings.

In addition to providing specific, actionable information to the 16 nature centers directly involved in the study, the research aims to develop theory and approaches relevant to nature centers and similar institutions in an array of contexts. Key outcomes will include lessons relevant to improving community relationships for nature centers and similar institutions across an array of settings as well as validated research instruments for adaptation and use by other nature centers and community institutions, such as zoos, museums, and aquaria.

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